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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes role transitions in small groups within the context of a more general model of group socialization that is based on the psychological processes of evaluation, commitment, and decision making. The major advantage of such an approach is that it specifies why role transitions in small groups occur. According to the model, groups and individuals change their role relationship when their levels of commitment, which are based on evaluations of readiness, cross their respective decision criteria. By examining different patterns of group and individual decision criteria and commitment levels, it is possible to differentiate various sources of strain associated with role transitions (e.g., mutual unreadiness, differential readiness, and mutual readiness), and to suggest ways in which the group and the individual might reduce such strain. This model of group socialization also may prove useful in clarifying related issues, e.g., sensitivity to strain, role transitions across external and internal group boundaries, and differential strain associated with positive and negative role transitions. (BL)

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1984/27

ROLE TRANSITIONS IN SMALL GROUPS

RICHARD L. MORELAND AND JOHN M. LEVINE

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Role Transitions in Small Groups

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Very little attention has been given to role transitions in small groups. Many important role transitions are related to "group socialization," or the affective, cognitive, and behavioral alterations that groups and individuals produce in one another from the beginning to the end of their relationship. Recently, we have developed a model of group socialization that seeks to describe and explain the passage of individuals through groups. Our model is meant to apply primarily (but not exclusively) to small, autonomous, voluntary groups whose members interact on a regular basis, have affective ties with one another, share a common frame of reference, and are behaviorally interdependent. A detailed description of the model and some of its implications for social influence can be found elsewhere (Levine & Moreland, in press; Moreland & Levine, 1982).

Socialization in Small Groups: A Brief Overview

Three major psychological processes operate within our model. First, the group and the individual engage in an ongoing *evaluation* of the rewardingness of their own and alternative relationships. On the basis of these evaluations, feelings of *commitment* develop between the group and the individual. Levels of commitment change in systematic ways over time, rising or falling to previously established decision criteria. When a decision criterion is crossed, a *role transition* takes place. The individual enters a new phase of group membership, and the relationship between the group and the individual changes. Evaluation proceeds, often along different dimensions, producing further changes in commitment and subsequent role transitions. In this way, the individual passes through five consecutive phases of group membership (investigation, socialization, maintenance, resocialization, remembrance), separated by four role transitions (entry, acceptance, divergence, exit). Fig-

ure 1 illustrates how the relationship between a group and an individual might change over time.

First, the group and the individual go through an *investigation* phase. The group engages in recruitment, looking for people who are likely to contribute to the attainment of group goals, and the individual engages in reconnaissance, looking for groups that are likely to contribute to the satisfaction of personal needs. If the group's and the individual's commitment levels rise to their respective entrance criteria (EC), then the individual undergoes the role transition of *entry* and is relabeled as a new member.

Following entry, both the group and the individual go through a *socialization* phase. The group attempts to produce assimilation in the individual so that he or she can make greater contributions to group goal attainment. At the same time, the individual attempts to produce accommodation in the group so that it can better satisfy his or her personal needs. If the commitment levels of both parties rise to their respective acceptance criteria (AC), then the individual undergoes the role transition of *acceptance* and is relabeled as a full member.

During the *maintenance* phase, the group and the individual engage in role negotiation. The group seeks to find a specialized role for the individual that maximizes his or her contributions to the attainment of group goals, and the individual attempts to define a specialized role that maximizes the satisfaction of personal needs. To the extent that the parties regard their relationship as unrewarding, their commitment levels will fall. If the group's and the individual's commitment levels

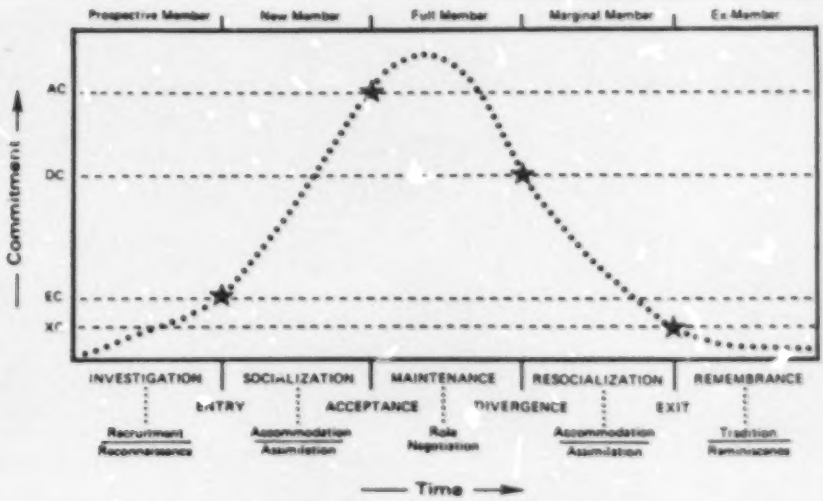


Figure 1. A Model of Group Socialization.

fall to their respective divergence criteria (DC), then the person undergoes the role transition of *divergence* and is relabeled as a marginal member.

Following divergence, the group and the individual go through a *resocialization* phase. Once again, the group seeks to produce individual assimilation, and the individual seeks to produce group accommodation. If the commitment levels of both parties rise to their respective divergence criteria, then a special role transition (convergence) occurs and the individual is relabeled again as a full member. In contrast, if the group's and the individual's commitment levels fall to their exit criteria (XC), then the individual undergoes the role transition of *exit* and is relabeled as an ex-member. (This second and more common outcome is depicted in Figure 1.)

Finally, a period of *remembrance* occurs after the individual leaves the group. The group and the individual engage in retrospective evaluations of their past relationship. These evaluations become part of the group's tradition and the individual's reminiscence. In addition, both parties may engage in ongoing evaluations of one another, insofar as they continue to provide mutual rewards and costs. Commitment between the group and the individual eventually stabilizes at some level.

Role Transitions: Sources of Strain

The processes of evaluation, commitment, and role transition, as well as the sequence of events depicted in Figure 1, are much more complex than space allows us to describe here (see Moreland & Levine, 1982, for a detailed discussion). Because the present book deals with role transitions, we will restrict our attention primarily to this aspect of our model. Role transitions are crucial to group socialization because they signal changes in the nature of the individual's relationship to the group. From our perspective, group membership is not an all-or-none phenomenon. Instead, there is an ingroup-outgroup dimension along which all of the people associated with the group can be placed. This dimension contains three role regions: non-member, quasi-member, and full member. Non-members include *prospective members* who have not yet joined the group and *ex-members* who have left the group. Quasi-members include *new members* who have not yet attained full member status and *marginal members* who have lost this status. *Full members* are those individuals who are most closely identified with the group and who have all of the privileges and responsibilities associated with group membership.[1]

According to our model, a role transition will occur when both the group's commitment to the individual and the individual's commitment to the group have reached their respective decision criteria. Decision criteria reflect the group's and the individual's judgments about the levels of commitment that warrant qualitative changes in their relationship. In the case of entry or acceptance, a role transition occurs when the commitment levels of both parties *rise* to their decision criteria. In the case of divergence or exit, a role transition occurs when the commitment levels of both parties *fall* to their decision criteria (see Figure 1).

In order to understand how a particular group and individual anticipate,

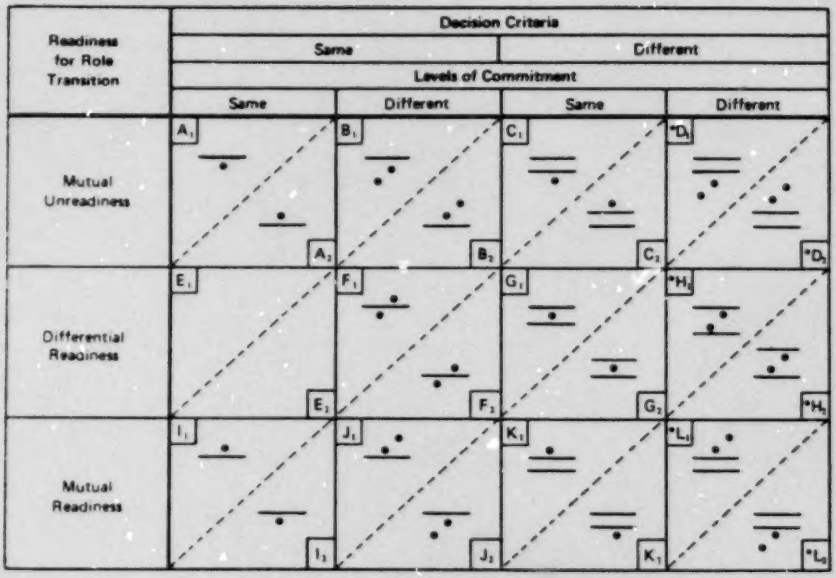
schedule, produce, and adjust to a role transition, it is necessary to consider six basic factors. These are the group's and the individual's commitment levels, decision criteria, and readiness for role transition (defined as whether or not commitment has crossed the relevant decision criterion). Figure 1 illustrates the simplest case, in which the group and the individual are always equally committed to one another, share the same set of decision criteria, and therefore are always mutually ready or unready for a given role transition. However, more complex cases can also arise. The six factors mentioned above can be conceptualized in terms of three dimensions that reflect similarities and differences between the group and the individual. Thus, regarding commitment levels and decision criteria, one can distinguish cases in which the group and the individual: (a) feel the same versus different commitment to one another and (b) hold the same versus different decision criteria. Regarding the readiness of the group and the individual for role transition, one can distinguish cases in which neither party's commitment level has crossed its decision criterion (mutual unreadiness), one party's commitment level has crossed its decision criterion but the other party's has not (differential readiness), and both parties' commitment levels have crossed their decision criteria (mutual readiness).

Figure 2 contains a 2 (decision criteria) × 2 (levels of commitment) × 3 (readiness for role transition) matrix based on the three dimensions discussed above. Each cell in the figure (except E) contains two diagrams, one above and one below the diagonal. Diagrams above the diagonals refer to the role transitions of entry and acceptance, in which commitment must rise in order for a transition to occur. Diagrams below the diagonals refer to the role transitions of divergence and exit, in which commitment must fall in order for a transition to occur. In each diagram, lines represent group or individual decision criteria and dots represent group or individual commitment levels. It should be noted that the figure does not contain all possible diagrams. Specifically, additional diagrams could be included in cells D, H, and L.

Anticipating a Role Transition

The diagrams in the first row of Figure 2 all illustrate situations in which neither the group nor the individual is ready for a role transition to occur. In each instance, the levels of commitment that the group and the individual feel toward one another have not crossed their respective decision criteria. As a result, neither party will attempt to change their role relationship. Nevertheless, there may well be some *anticipation* of the role transition by both the group and the individual, which can affect their relations with one another.

Anticipation of a role transition can involve expectancies about: (a) the probability that the role transition will actually occur; (b) how and when the role transition will take place; and (c) whether the new role relationship will be pleasant or unpleasant. The kinds of expectancies that each party has about the role transition depend largely on the distance between its current level of commitment and its decision criterion. As that distance decreases, there will be a tendency to view the role transition



Note. In the diagrams, lines represent group or individual decision criteria and dots represent group or individual commitment levels. Diagrams above the diagonals refer to the role transitions of entry and acceptance; diagrams below the diagonals refer to the role transitions of divergence and exit. In some cells (*), additional diagrams could be drawn.

Figure 2. Group and Individual Decision Criteria, Levels of Commitmment, and Readiness for Role Transition.

as more probable, make more concrete plans for its production, and be more enthusiastic about its occurrence.

Insofar as they communicate their expectancies about the upcoming role transition to one another, the group and the individual may begin to experience strain in their relationship. When the commitment levels of both parties are equally distant from their respective decision criteria, the group and the individual will generally share similar beliefs about whether the role transition will occur, plans for how and when it should be produced, and feelings about its desirability. Communicating these similar expectancies to one another should not create strain in the relationship between the group and the individual. However, expectancies about the role transition will diverge as the distance between the group's commitment level and decision criterion and the distance between the individual's commitment level and decision criterion become increasingly unequal. When these unequal expectancies are communicated either directly or indirectly to the other party, strain can be produced in the relationship. Disagreements may arise about when or if the role transition will

occur, what form it will take, and whether the new role relationship will be more rewarding than the old one. The group and the individual may also discover previously unsuspected differences in their levels of commitment to one another or in their decision criteria for the role transition.

Cell A in Figure 2 contains diagrams illustrating the relatively simple situation in which the group and the individual share a common decision criterion and are equally committed to one another. Neither party is ready for a role transition to occur, since its commitment has not yet risen to the entry or acceptance criterion (A1) or fallen to the divergence or exit criterion (A2). Under these conditions, anticipation of the role transition should produce relatively little strain in the relationship between the group and the individual.

Cells B, C, and D all contain diagrams illustrating more complex situations in which the group and the individual differ from one another in their decision criteria or commitment levels. Once again, neither party is ready for a role transition to occur, since commitment has not yet risen to the entry or acceptance criterion (B1, C1, D1) or fallen to the divergence or exit criterion (B2, C2, D2). Anticipation of the role transition might well produce some strain in each of these situations, however, since the group and the individual differ in how close their current levels of commitment are to their respective decision criteria.

The diagrams in cell B illustrate situations in which the group and the individual share the same decision criterion but are differentially committed to one another. In these situations the party whose level of commitment is higher will be closer to the shared entry or acceptance criterion (B1) but further from the shared divergence or exit criterion (B2). As a result, the party with higher commitment (a) will view entry or acceptance as more probable and make more concrete plans for its production and be more enthusiastic about its possible occurrence, and (b) will view divergence or exit as less probable and make less concrete plans for its production and be less enthusiastic about changing roles.

The diagrams in cell C illustrate situations in which the group and the individual are equally committed to one another but have different decision criteria. Here, the party whose decision criterion is higher will be further from entry or acceptance (C1) but closer to divergence or exit (C2). Therefore, the party whose decision criterion is higher (a) will view entry or acceptance as less probable and make less concrete plans for its production and be less enthusiastic about its possible occurrence, and (b) will view divergence or exit as more probable and make more concrete plans for its production and be more enthusiastic about changing roles.

Finally, the diagrams in cell D illustrate situations in which the group and the individual differ in both their decision criteria and their commitment levels. In such situations, the party whose commitment level is closer to its decision criterion will view the role transition as more probable and make more concrete plans for its production and be more enthusiastic about its possible occurrence. These differences in expectancies will occur whether the role transition involves entry or acceptance (D1) or divergence or exit (D2).

Scheduling a Role Transition

The diagrams in the second row of Figure 2 all illustrate situations in which either the group *or* the individual (but not both) is ready for a role transition to occur. In each instance, the commitment level of one party has crossed its decision criterion, but the commitment level of the other party has not. As a result, the former party will attempt to initiate the role transition, but will probably be rebuffed by the latter party. This initial failure to change roles is usually followed by a period of negotiation between the group and the individual regarding the *scheduling* of the role transition. During this period, the party that is ready for the role transition will use a variety of social influence tactics to hasten its occurrence. At the same time, analogous tactics will be used by the other party to delay the occurrence of the role transition. Inevitably, negotiations of this sort produce strain in the relationship between the group and the individual.

Social influence tactics designed to hasten or delay a role transition will be successful insofar as they raise or lower the decision criterion or commitment level of the party to which they are directed. Raising decision criteria, for example, delays entry and acceptance but hastens divergence and exit. Raising commitment levels, in contrast, hastens entry and acceptance but delays divergence and exit.

There are many ways in which the group or the individual might change one another's decision criterion. Perhaps the most common tactic involves publicly engaging in a kind of social comparison process, in which the appropriateness of the current role relationship between the group and the individual is "tested" by comparing it with another role relationship familiar to both parties. This other role relationship may involve another individual in the same group, the same individual in another group, or another individual in another group. The effectiveness of the comparison depends on the extent to which the commitment levels between the parties involved in that alternative relationship seem analogous to the current levels of commitment between the group and the individual. If the comparison is effective and indicates that the two role relationships are the same, then the decision criterion of the party that was unready for the role transition will be validated. As a result, the role transition under negotiation will probably be delayed. The party that was ready to change roles will tend to raise its entry or acceptance criterion or lower its divergence or exit criterion, thereby making the role transition seem less desirable. An effective comparison that indicates that the two role relationships are different, however, will validate the decision criterion of the party that was ready for the role transition. This, in turn, will probably hasten the role transition under negotiation. The party that was unready to change roles will tend to lower its entry or acceptance criterion or raise its divergence or exit criterion. As a result, the role transition will seem more desirable.

Commitment levels can also be changed in a variety of ways. According to our model of group socialization, commitment is based on comparisons between: (a) the rewardingness of the current relationship between the group and the individual and (b) the rewardingness of various alternative relationships. These comparisons may

be based on memories of the past, perceptions of the present, or expectancies of the future (see Moreland & Levine, 1982, for details). Commitment can be increased, therefore, by: (a) raising the perceived rewardingness of the past, present, or future relationship between the group and the individual or (b) lowering the perceived rewardingness of their available past, present, or future alternative relationships. If these tactics are successful in producing increased commitment, then the party that was unready for entry or acceptance will regard a role transition as more desirable and the party that was ready for divergence or exit will regard a role transition as less desirable. Similarly, commitment can be decreased by: (a) lowering the perceived rewardingness of the past, present, or future relationship between the group and the individual or (b) raising the perceived rewardingness of their available past, present, or future alternative relationships. If these tactics are successful in producing decreased commitment, then the party that was ready for entry or acceptance will regard a role transition as less desirable and the party that was unready for divergence or exit will regard a role transition as more desirable.

As we noted earlier, the anticipation of a role transition is strongly affected by the distance between each party's commitment level and its respective decision criterion. This variable is also quite important in scheduling a role transition. As the distance between its level of commitment and decision criterion increases, both the group and the individual will negotiate more forcefully. That is, the party that is ready for the role transition will be even more interested in changing the current role relationship, whereas the party that is unready for the role transition will be even less interested in such a change. The scheduling process nearly always produces some strain in the relationship between the group and the individual; moreover, that strain will increase as the sum of the distances between the group's and the individual's commitment levels and their decision criteria grows larger.

Cell E in Figure 2 is interesting because it represents a class of situations that never occurs. Given the assumptions built into our model of group socialization, it is not possible for the group and the individual to share a common decision criterion and be equally committed to one another, yet be differentially ready for a role transition to occur. Both parties will be unready for a role transition before their level of commitment has crossed the relevant decision criterion, and ready for a role transition after that decision criterion has been crossed. Differential readiness is impossible.

Cells F, G, and H contain diagrams illustrating more common situations in which the group and the individual differ from one another in their decision criteria or commitment levels. In each instance, one party is ready for the role transition but the other party is not. The diagrams in cell F illustrate situations in which the group and the individual share the same decision criterion but are differentially committed to one another. In these situations, the party whose level of commitment is higher will attempt to hasten entry or acceptance (F1) and to delay divergence or exit (F2). Similarly, attempts to delay entry or acceptance and to hasten divergence or exit will be made by the party whose commitment level is lower. The diagrams in cell G illustrate situations in which the group and the individual are equally committed to one

another but have different decision criteria. Here attempts to hasten entry or acceptance (G1) and to delay divergence or exit (G2) will be made by the party whose decision criterion is lower. At the same time, the party whose decision criterion is higher will attempt to delay entry or acceptance and to hasten divergence or exit. Finally, the diagrams in cell H illustrate situations in which the group and the individual differ in both their decision criteria and their commitment levels. Attempts to hasten entry or acceptance (H1) will be made by the party whose level of commitment is above its decision criterion. Attempts to delay entry or acceptance will be made by the party whose commitment level is below its decision criterion. In regard to divergence and exit (H2), the party that is below its decision criterion will attempt to hasten the role transition and the party that is above its decision criterion will attempt to delay it.

Producing a Role Transition and Adjusting Afterwards

The diagrams in the third row of Figure 2 all illustrate situations in which both the group and the individual are ready for a role transition to occur. In each instance, the levels of commitment that the group and the individual feel toward one another have crossed their respective decision criteria. As a result, a role transition will take place and the group and the individual will begin a new role relationship. Despite their mutual readiness for such a change, however, the group and the individual may still disagree about the *production* of the role transition. Moreover, after the role transition has occurred, one or both parties may also experience a difficult *adjustment* to the new role relationship. These problems will, of course, also create strain in the relationship between the group and the individual.

The production of a role transition can be a difficult affair, requiring decisions about such matters as timing, scripts, props, and so on. Detailed discussions of the various forms that a role transition can take can be found elsewhere (e.g., Garfinkel, 1956; Glaser & Strauss, 1971; Roth, 1963; Schwartz, 1979; Van Gennep, 1960). From our perspective, however, one of the most important issues regarding a role transition is its "efficiency." An efficient role transition is one that alters the role relationship between the group and the individual quickly, easily, and permanently. In contrast, an inefficient role transition is slow, difficult to accomplish, and capable of being misinterpreted, ignored or forgotten, and perhaps even undone by either party. When a group and an individual are producing a role transition, each party's desire for efficiency is directly related to the distance between that party's current level of commitment and its decision criterion. As that distance increases, both the group and the individual will feel a greater sense of urgency regarding the role transition and will therefore attempt to produce it more efficiently. When the commitment levels of the group and the individual are equally distant from their respective decision criteria, few disagreements will arise regarding the production of the role transition. Disagreements will become more frequent and serious, however, as the distances between the group's and the individual's respective commitment levels and decision criteria become increasingly unequal. The party whose level of commitment

is furthest from its decision criterion will prefer a more efficient role transition, whereas the other party will prefer to proceed more cautiously.

Once a role transition has been produced, both the group and the individual must learn to adjust to their new role relationship. At least initially, problems often arise because each party fails to meet the other's expectations for that new role. There may be misunderstandings about what those expectations are or disagreements about what they should be. Also, the group and the individual may agree about their expectations for one another but be unwilling or unable to behave accordingly. In order to solve these problems of adjustment, both the group and the individual may have to alter their expectations or behavior. Once again, the distance between each party's current level of commitment and its decision criterion becomes important. As that distance increases, both the group and the individual will be more willing to solve any adjustment problems by altering their own expectations and behavior, rather than by trying to alter the expectations and behavior of the other party. This cooperative approach facilitates adjustment to the new role relationship. When the commitment levels of the group and the individual are equally distant from their respective decision criteria, their level of adjustment to the new relationship will be about the same and both parties will be equally cooperative. As the distances between the group's and the individual's respective commitment levels and decision criteria become increasingly unequal, however, both the number of adjustment problems that they experience and their approaches to solving those problems will diverge. The party whose level of commitment is furthest from its decision criterion will have fewer adjustment problems following the role transition and will attempt to solve any adjustment problems in a more cooperative manner. In contrast, the other party will experience more problems of adjustment and will be less cooperative in solving whatever adjustment problems arise.

Cell I of Figure 2 contains diagrams illustrating situations in which the group and the individual share a common decision criterion and are equally committed to one another. Both parties are ready for a role transition to occur, since their level of commitment already has risen to the entry or acceptance criterion (I1) or has fallen to the divergence or exit criterion (I2). Under these conditions, few disagreements should arise regarding the production of the role transition, and the group and the individual should be equally well-adjusted to their new role relationship and cooperative in solving any problems they may have.

Cells J, K, and L all contain diagrams illustrating situations in which the group and the individual differ from one another in their decision criteria or commitment levels. Once again, both parties are ready for a role transition to occur, since their commitment levels already have risen to their entry or acceptance criteria (J1, K1, L1) or have fallen to their divergence or exit criteria (J2, K2, L2). Because the group and the individual differ in how close their current levels of commitment are to their respective decision criteria in each situation, however, disagreements are likely to arise regarding the production of the role transition. Furthermore, differential adjustment to the new role relationship is likely to occur and the resolution of adjust-

ment problems will often involve concessions by one party in response to demands by the other.

The diagrams in cell J illustrate situations in which the group and the individual share the same decision criterion but are differentially committed to one another. In these situations, the party whose level of commitment is higher will be further from the entry or acceptance criterion (J1) but closer to the divergence or exit criterion (J2). As a result, the party with higher commitment will: (a) attempt to produce entry or acceptance more efficiently and have fewer adjustment problems and be more cooperative afterwards, and (b) attempt to produce divergence or exit less efficiently and have more adjustment problems and be less cooperative following the role transition.

The diagrams in cell K illustrate situations in which the group and the individual are equally committed to one another but have different decision criteria. Here, the party whose decision criterion is higher will be closer to entry or acceptance (K1) but further from divergence or exit (K2). Therefore, the party with the higher decision criterion will: (a) attempt to produce entry or acceptance less efficiently and have more adjustment problems and be less cooperative afterwards, and (b) attempt to produce divergence or exit more efficiently and have fewer adjustment problems and be more cooperative following the transition.

Finally, the diagrams in cell L illustrate situations in which the group and the individual differ in both their decision criteria and their commitment levels. In such situations, attempts to produce entry or acceptance (L1) and divergence or exit (L2) efficiently will be greater for the party whose level of commitment is further from its decision criterion. That same party will also have fewer problems in adjusting to the new role relationship and will be more cooperative in trying to solve whatever problems arise.

Role Transitions: Reactions to Strain

Clearly, role transitions often represent a source of strain in the relationship between the group and the individual. We have identified three general classes of situations in which such strain can occur. First, there are situations involving mutual unreadiness for a role transition, in which the commitment level of neither the group nor the individual has crossed its decision criterion. In these situations strain results from differential expectancies about the probability that a role transition will occur, how and when it will take place, and the pleasantness or unpleasantness of the new role relationship. Second, there are situations involving differential readiness for a role transition, in which the commitment level of either the group or the individual has crossed its decision criterion, but the commitment level of the other party has not. Here strain results from the desire of one party to hasten the role transition and the desire of the other party to delay it. Third, there are situations involving mutual readiness for a role transition, in which the commitment levels of both parties have crossed their respective decision criteria. In these situations strain results from disagreements about how the role transition should be produced, whether the new role

relationship is rewarding, and how any problems of adjustment to the new relationship should be resolved.

Strain is calculated differently depending on the readiness of the group and the individual for the role transition. When the group and the individual are either mutually unready or mutually ready for a role transition, the amount of strain they experience is directly related to the *difference* between: (a) the distance between the group's decision criterion and level of commitment and (b) the distance between the individual's decision criterion and level of commitment. However, when the group and the individual are differentially ready for a role transition, the amount of strain they experience is directly related to the *sum* of these two distances.

Strain associated with a role transition typically decreases the rewardingness of the relationship between the group and the individual. In order to improve their relationship, one or both parties must take effective action to reduce that strain. Effective action requires first the realization that the difficulties between the group and the individual stem from a problematical role transition. In many cases, it will be very clear to both parties that a role transition is the source of their difficulties. In other cases, however, misattributions can occur. If the role transition is not especially salient to the group or the individual, then they may mistakenly decide that their difficulties have other causes, such as specific inadequacies in the individual or the group, or external pressures that create incompatibility between them.

Once the group or the individual has correctly attributed the difficulties in their relationship to a problematical role transition, it then becomes necessary to determine why that strain has occurred. This requires at least some awareness of the decision criteria of both the group and the individual. We assume that groups and individuals are aware of their *own* decision criteria, although this need not always be the case. Unfortunately, information about the *other party's* decision criterion is often difficult to obtain. Individuals rarely talk about their decision criteria, and, although some groups publicize their criteria, others do not. Additional confusion can occur when the group has different decision criteria for different members or the individual has different decision criteria for different groups. Both groups and individuals may also change their decision criteria over time.

To assess one another's decision criterion, the group and the individual can use either direct or indirect tactics. Direct tactics usually involve one party openly asking the other about its decision criterion. Indirect tactics involve one party inferring the other's decision criterion in some way. Inferences of this sort might be based on observations of other role transitions in which the decision criteria of the parties involved can be easily estimated. Inferences about decision criteria may also be based on statements by parties who have already undergone the role transition in question. Finally, the group or the individual can engage in "decision criterion testing," by initiating a role transition and observing the other party's reaction.

In order to determine why strain has occurred, the group and the individual also must have some awareness of both parties' commitment levels. Once again, we assume that each party is aware of its *own* commitment level, although this may not always be the case. Information about the *other party's* commitment level, however, is

more difficult to obtain. Groups and individuals may be reticent about openly expressing their commitment to one another for a variety of reasons, including possible embarrassment and reduced bargaining power. Embarrassment can arise when the commitment level of one party is much lower than that of the other party; to avoid this embarrassment, the less committed party may conceal or lie about the commitment discrepancy. Reduced bargaining power can occur when the commitment level of one party is much higher than that of the other party (cf. Levine & Moreland, in press); to avoid this reduced bargaining power, the more committed party may also conceal or lie about the commitment discrepancy.

To assess one another's commitment level, the group and the individual can again use either direct or indirect tactics. Direct tactics usually involve one party openly asking the other about its commitment level. Indirect tactics involve one party inferring the other's commitment level in some way. At the simplest level, each party can observe how it is treated by the other and then make inferences about the level of commitment underlying that treatment. At a more complex level, these observations can be compared to observations of similar role relationships in which the group or the individual is involved. Finally, the group or the individual can engage in "commitment testing," by creating situations that force the other party to make explicit its level of commitment (cf. Hinde, 1979).

Assuming that the group and the individual are aware of their own decision criterion and commitment level and have obtained analogous information about the other party, they can estimate the severity of the strain associated with the role transition and think about alternative approaches to reducing that strain. If the amount of strain is less unpleasant than any of the available alternative approaches to reducing it, then the group and the individual may simply decide to endure the strain. In contrast, the group and the individual will attempt to reduce strain if an approach can be found that seems less unpleasant than the strain and relatively likely to succeed.

Such an approach must inevitably involve altering the distances between the group's and the individual's respective decision criteria and commitment levels. This can be accomplished indirectly by adjusting the two decision criteria or the two commitment levels. A more direct approach involves adjusting one or both of the distances between each party's decision criterion and commitment level. In any particular situation, these different approaches to reducing strain will vary in their perceived difficulty and perceived probability of success. Sometimes, the group and the individual will decide that it is easier and more productive to change their own commitment level or decision criterion, rather than those of the other party. In other cases, both forms of change may occur. The "principle of least effort" probably governs which approaches are chosen to reduce the strain associated with a role transition. Both the group and the individual probably begin with the approach that seems easiest and most likely to succeed. More difficult and less productive approaches are subsequently used only if they seem less unpleasant than the level of residual strain.

Conclusion

Relatively little attention has been given to the issue of role transitions in small groups. We have attempted to analyze such transitions within the context of a more general model of group socialization. The major advantage of such an approach is that it specifies why role transitions in small groups occur. According to our model, groups and individuals change their role relationship when their levels of commitment (which are based on evaluations of rewardingness) cross their respective decision criteria. By examining different patterns of group and individual decision criteria and commitment levels, it has been possible to differentiate various sources of strain associated with role transitions and to suggest ways in which the group and the individual might reduce such strain.

There are, of course, other issues regarding role transitions in small groups that we have not discussed in detail. For example, differences between the group and the individual may well exist regarding sensitivity to the strain associated with role transitions and the ability to reduce such strain. There may also be interesting differences among the four role transitions specified in our model (entry, acceptance, divergence, exit). Role transitions that involve traversing "external" group boundaries (entry, exit) may produce more strain than those that involve traversing "internal" group boundaries (acceptance, divergence). In addition, groups and individuals may handle the strain associated with "positive" role transitions (entry, acceptance) differently from that associated with "negative" role transitions (divergence, exit). We believe that our model of group socialization will prove useful in clarifying these and related issues.

Notes

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[1]We conceptualize these five categories of membership as roles rather than statuses, because we are primarily interested in the behavioral changes that accompany movement from one category to another.

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